Feb 2026

BRIDGEBUILDING:
Nurturing Democracy amid Polarisation
Lessons from Colombia

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European Research Council

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Executive Summary

'Bridgebuilding' is a term that refers to the practice of bringing together people or groups who do not usually come into contact, and who have political or social perspectives that could in some contexts be opposed to each other. In the current moment of global concern about political polarisation and its effect on democracy, it is crucial to learn from existing experiences of bridgebuilding. This report presents findings from an ethnographic investigation into bridgebuilding in Colombia, carried out as part of the project *Stories of Divided Politics: Polarisation and Bridgebuilding in Colombia and Britain*, based at the University of Edinburgh, developed in Colombia in collaboration with Embrace Dialogue (Rodeemos el Diálogo, ReD). The report aims to enrich debate within Colombia about dialogue and bridgebuilding as components of peacebuilding and depolarisation, and offer lessons learned from Colombia for other divided societies.

The report first presents theoretical approaches to bridgebuilding, positioning it as a relational practice, one which seeks not to eliminate conflict in human coexistence, but to nurture democracy and contribute to peace. Second, it presents four case studies of bridgebuilding initiatives in Colombia which use dialogue to reduce political divisions in society, all with different objectives, scales, and approaches. Third, it analyses similarities and differences, and fourth, it concludes offering a vision of bridgebuilding based on this empirical analysis as an intentional act that generates organic processes which are spontaneous and unpredictable. Bridgebuilding aims to contribute to public issues, and as such is a political practice which generates virtual spirals of encounter and builds a more expansive "us" in Colombian society, nurturing democracy amid polarisation and building the relational infrastructure for peace. The report ends with some good practices identified among the different initiatives.

Acknowledgements:

We thank all the bridgebuilders and dialogue participants who generously contributed their time and expertise: Myriam Méndez, Sofía Ramírez, Irina Ávila, Mauricio Zapata, Maira Gil, Gabriel Ignacio Rodríguez, Rubén Fernández Andrade, Cristian Gil, Antonio Madariaga, María Paula Prada, Diego Bautista, Diego Junca, Rubén Pardo, Carlos Franco Echavarría, Alejandro 'Alfaman' Sánchez, Dora Torres, Felipe López Sánchez, Gloria Edilma López, Leidy Efigenia Usuga Arbelaez, Alba Maria Torres Borja, and Andrea Toro. This project was funded by European Research Council-selected Starting Grant [ERC-STG-2023 101116016], "Stories of Divided Politics: Polarisation and Bridgebuilding in Colombia and Britain", which is guarantee-funded by UK Research and Innovation [EP/Y03628X/1].

1. Presentation

Political polarisation has become a central concern in societies worldwide. In response, diverse initiatives have emerged which seek to reduce the intensity of hostile political divisions. This report analyses **bridgebuilding**, understood as **the intentional efforts to bring together people or groups who do not usually come into contact, and who have political or social perspectives that could in some contexts be opposed to each other.** These encounters do not seek to eliminate difference, but create relationships based on recognising the humanity of the other, even in the middle of strong disagreement.

This report presents findings from an ethnographic investigation in Colombia, carried out as part of the project *Stories of Divided Politics: Polarisation and Bridgebuilding in Colombia and Britain*, based at the University of Edinburgh and developed in Colombia in collaboration with Embrace Dialogue (ReD). The objective of the investigation was **to understand how different individuals and organisations try to build bridges between politically divided sectors of society.**

Bridgebuilding is a practice which consists of **creating encounters across difference.** At its heart is **confrontation**, in the philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas's sense of being confronted with the reality, existence and humanity of the other,[1] and in that of philosopher Chantal Mouffe's concept of agonistic pluralism: the confrontation of apparently opposite positions that often have no resolution.[2] This practice encapsulates **a vision of democracy as conflict.** Bridgebuilders assume disagreement as a constitutive part of social life and aim to sustain complex relationships, not produce artificial consensuses.

There are many stories, both in academia and popular discourse, about people who resist or who stand up to injustice: think of Gandhi, or Greta Thunberg. These are important stories that deserve to be celebrated and analysed. And bridgebuilding is not always possible: in contexts where one group threatens another with immediate violence, it is first necessary to create minimum security conditions. Similarly, building bridges does not mean avoiding taking political or moral positions, for example, against the ideology of the supremacy of one group over another.[3] However, most major social transformations –from the end of apartheid in South Africa to women's suffrage in the UK— have generally taken place thanks to a combination of resistance and the painstaking filigree work of bridgebuilding. History often values resistance, but does not always make visible this laborious relational labour.

This research project aims to learn from those who create encounters across difference and nurture democracy amid polarisation. The report seeks to contribute to the debate in Colombia about dialogue and bridgebuilding as key elements of peacebuilding and depolarisation, make visible and recognise the work of bridgebuilding in the country, offer new perspectives for civil society organisations dedicated to similar practices, including methodological and theoretical justifications they can share with donors, participants and institutions, and offer lessons learned from Colombia for other divided societies.

[1] Levinas, Emmanuel. 1979. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. London: M. Nijhoff.

[2] Mouffe, Chantal. 2005. *On the Political*. London: Routledge.

[3] powell, john a. and Stephen Menendian. 2024. *Belonging without Othering: How We Save Ourselves and the World.* Stanford: University of California Press, p176.

2. The Colombian Context: Conflict, Polarisation and Dialogue

Colombia offers an important context to study bridgebuilding. The **2016 peace accord** signed with the FARC guerrillas (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) sought to bring about the transition from armed conflict to political conflict, understood as the management of difference via words and institutions. However, the peace accord was rejected by 50.2% in a referendum, creating a new political identity division which intersected with **pre-existing divisions:** between left and right, urban and rural, rich and poor, between generations and genders, and between different experiences and interpretations of the armed conflict.[4]

These divisions continued and evolved in subsequent years, particularly with the 2022 election of Gustavo Petro, former guerrilla fighter in the M19 and Colombia's first left-wing present. According to a survey by It's Brave to Dialogue *(Valiente es Dialogar)*, Petro's presidency features among the issues that most divide public opinion, together with the figure of former right-wing president Álvaro Uribe Vélez, leader of the 'No' campaign in the peace referendum.[5] These two leaderships embody opposing visions of the country and the armed conflict, reinforcing antagonistic political identities.

Petro promised to implement the peace accord with the FARC and negotiate with the remaining armed groups, including guerrilla groups and paramilitary and high-impact criminal groups. His **"total peace"** policy opened several negotiations in parallel, but progress has been irregular. While some regions have seen reductions in violence, such as in the province of Nariño in the context of negotiations with guerrilla group Comuneros del Sur, the armed conflict in other regions has intensified, producing, among other atrocities, the mass forced displacement of 60,000 people in Catatumbo, due to combat between groups.

This scenario is aggravated by **diplomatic tensions** between the Colombian government and the administration of Donald Trump in the United States, and the cuts to international cooperation, particularly agencies like USAID which have historically financed peacebuilding initiatives. A growing **distrust** toward politicians and state institutions compounds this situation, part of a global tendency.[6]

According to the *Valiente es Dialogar* survey, 84% of Colombians believe the country is polarised, and 40% believe that this polarisation affects their own family.[7] This kind of study shows that Colombians *believe themselves to be polarised.* However, other studies question whether the country is as polarised as it is commonly said to be,[8] and there is no academic consensus on how to define and measure polarisation.[9] Nevertheless, the widespread use of the term both in Colombia and globally suggests that people are trying to name **something felt and lived** on multiple scales: local, national and international.[10]

In the face of this phenomenon of **polarisation as lived experience**, diverse initiatives have sprung up in Colombia which propose **dialogue as a strategy** to reduce the intensity of political divisions. This study focuses on **four dialogue initiatives**, selected for the diversity of their approaches, target populations and objectives.

4 Burnyeat, Gwen. 2024. 'Reverberations: Political Identity Boundaries after the Colombian Peace Referendum'. *Journal of Language and Politics*, 23(5), 677-698. https://doi.org/10.1075/jlp.24099.bur

5 Valiente es Dialogar. 2025. Report. 'La diferencia como oportunidad: Documento de análisis de los resultados de la encuesta sobre polarización en Colombia (2025)'. https://valienteesdialogar.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/La-diferencia-como-oportunidad-2.pdf

6 Edelman Trust Barometer. 2023. Report. '2023 Edelman trust barometer annual report'.

7 Valiente es Dialogar, Ibid.

8 Movilizatorio. 2022. Report. 'Estudio de Reconciliación y Polarización En Colombia: Resultados Segunda Fase'. https://movilizatorio.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Estudio-de-reconciliacion-y-polarizacion-en-Colombia.pdf. Differently, some leftist civil society figures argue that 'polarisation' is not an adequate term to describe divisions in Colombia, e.g. Tufano, Sara. 2020. 'No es polarización, es resistencia'. El Tiempo, 9 October. https://www.eltiempo.com/opinion/columnistas/sara-tufano/no-es-polarizacion-es-resistencia-columna-de-sara-tufano-542330

9 Freeman, Mark. 2023. Discussion Paper. 'First Principles: The Need for Greater Consensus on the Fundamentals of Polarisation.' Institute for Integrated Transitions (IFIT). https://ifit-transitions.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/First-Principles-The-Need-for-Greater-Consensus-on-the-Fundamentals-of-Polarisation-Final.pdf

10 Burnyeat, Gwen. 2025. 'Intimate Polarisation: Political Divisions within Everyday Family Relationships in Colombia'. *Contemporary Politics*: https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2025.2502640

3. Defining "Bridgebuilding"

The idea of bringing people from different sectors together comes partly from **intergroup contact theory**, first developed by psychologist G**ordon Allport**, who suggested that contact between people with identity divisions can reduce prejudice under certain conditions.[11] Although in some cases the encounter with an "other" reaffirms existing biases, in others, such contact, above all if repeated, can lead to recognition of the humanity of the other and the creation of mutual empathy, even if the parties do not get to consensuses.

From a pragmatic perspective, **William Ury**, American anthropologist and negotiation expert, conceptualises bridgebuilding as a **conflict prevention technique:** the creation of "cross-cutting ties" between relationships of potential or actual conflict to "build trust and establish natural avenues for communication".[12]

john a. powell, professor of law and African American studies at the University of California, understands bridgebuilding as a practice in which members of divided groups enter into contact and build trust, with the purpose of **developing a "more expansive we".**[13] This implies listening to the story of the other, not to arrive at some kind of truth, but to affirm their humanity. From this perspective, bridgebuilding does not seek to eradicate difference: many encounters across difference involve **highly unequal power relations** and **consensus is not always possible or desirable.**

Another perspective is that of **Krzystof Czyżewski**, writer and director of the International Centre for Dialogue on the border between Poland and Lithuania, a land charged with the traumas of the Second World War, where Orthodox and Jewish Poles and Lithuanians coexist. Czyżewski uses culture –music, theatre, traditional recipes and folksongs—to bring people together from both sides of the border and create a "borderlands culture" from the fractures of the past. In his conception, bridgebuilding is **a continuous and iterative process,** "broken down into small steps, micro actions, chains of interpersonal activity".[14] It does not seek to minimise difference, but conceives of a world "constituted of Others", in which **alterity is a condition of political community.**[15]

Threading together these perspectives, we can see bridgebuilding as a **relational** or **relationship-centred practice**, defined as practices that put relationships first.[16] There is increasing evidence that relational practices achieve more efficient, effective, sustainable, significant and transformative results. Relationship-centred practices are successful not because relationships are more important than everything else, but because they constitute the foundations upon which better and more informed decisions are taken.[17] We can see **bridgebuilding as a relational practice to nurture democracy and contribute to peacebuilding.**

All human beings have **multiple identities**; if we can access our own multiplicity, it's more probably we can recognise the multiplicity of the other. Neuroscientist **Nazareth Castellanos** draws a parallel between social life and what happens in our brains: when we learn, we build bridges between neurons. For her, the encounter with the other is the basis of human experience: "it makes us recognise part of ourselves in the other" and changes both parties neuronally and socially.[18] Bridgebuilding has a **healing and spiritual component** because it connects us with the interconnectedness of our social and natural world; what Buddhist thinker Thich Nhat Hanh calls "interbeing".[19]

Dialogue as a Form of Bridgebuilding

In Colombia, **the concept of dialogue is prevalent among the cases we studied. We differentiate between bridgebuilding and dialogue** because, while dialogue is a method for bridgebuilding, it is not necessarily the only one. Dialogue, in the view of the initiatives under study, is not simply a rational exchange of ideas, nor is it a negotiation. It is a practice involving the body, the emotions, the intuition and the life stories of those who take part. Yet bridgebuilding goes beyond dialogue. Bridgebuilding refers to the practice but also to the result: the creation of a relational infrastructure which allows disagreement to be sustained without violence.

Bridgebuilding as a Component of Peacebuilding

Although bridgebuilding can contribute to peacebuilding, they are not equivalent concepts. **Peacebuilding** includes all efforts to transition from war to peace and prevent reactivation of armed conflict. These can include, among other things, ceasefire monitoring, reintegration of combatants, institutional reforms, human rights protection, and processes of memory-making and reconciliation.[20]

Bridgebuilding does not substitute other dimensions of peacebuilding, nor can it be deployed in isolation from relevant political, economic and security conditions. Yet it is **a key ingredient** because it promotes empathy, knowledge and understanding of the other, and creates new and changed relationships that enable people to imagine a different future together. Those brave enough to relate across divisions create **the relational infrastructure for a possible peace.**

To Summarise:

- **Dialogue** is a *method of encounter* gathering strength in Colombia; **bridgebuilding** is a *relational practice which builds and maintains relationships* that allow for recognising difference, inhabiting conflict, and promoting coexistence.

- **Peacebuilding** encompasses all efforts to transition from war to peace; **bridgebuilding** is a key ingredient in peacebuilding because it promotes better relations between divided sectors of society, developing the relational infrastructure that enables people to imagine a peaceful future.

Bringing together these different theoretical perspectives, in this report we understand **bridgebuilding as a relational practice that can prevent conflicts and establish a more expansive "we", without eradicating difference or creating false consensuses, in a reiterative process which recognises otherness and conflict as an integral part of human coexistence and of politics.** Far from being fixed structures, the 'bridges' built in these processes are dynamic and fragile, requiring maintenance through care and repetition. These bridges create conditions for constructive disagreement, without demonising the other. **They expand the possibilities for living well together, by recognising conflict as a constitutive part of social life and building relationships that allow difference to be experienced without violence.**

11 Allport, Gordon. 1954. *The nature of prejudice.* Cambridge, MA: Perseus Books.

12 Ury, William. 2000. *The Third Way: Why We Fight and How We Can Stop.* New York: Penguin Books.

13 john a. powell with Rachelle Galloway-Popotas. 2024. *The Power of Bridging: How to Build a World Where We All Belong.* Boulder: Sounds True

14 Czyżewski, Krzysztof. 2022. *Toward Xenopolis: Visions from the Borderland.* University of Rochester Press, p38

15 Ibid., page 4

16 Lloyd-Rose, Matt, David Robinson and Immy Robinson. 2024. Report. 'Putting Relationships First: The case for relationship-centred communities, organisations and systems.' Relationships Project. https://relationshipsproject.org/case-maker/

17 Ibid.

18 Castellanos, Nazareth. 2025. *El Puente Donde Habitan las Mariposas. Biosofía de la respiración.* Cofás: Siruela, p99-100

19 Nhat Hanh, Thich. n.d. 'Interbeing'. https://www.awakin.org/v2/read/view.php?tid=2619

20 United Nations definition: https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/peace-and-security#:~:text=Within%20the%20United%20Nations%2C%20peacebuilding,foster%20reconciliation%20after%20past%20atrocities.

4. Research Methodology

In a first phase, the research team carried out a **broad mapping of bridgebuilding initiatives and scenarios** in Colombia. Based on this exercise, **four dialogue initiatives** were selected as case studies, with the objective of analysing different forms of bridgebuilding in different contexts.

These four cases were followed via **ten months of ethnographic fieldwork** carried out by ethnographic researcher **Juliana Franco Calvo.** The ethnography was based principally on **participant observation**, understood as the sustained presence of the researcher –with her body, emotions and subjectivity—in the spaces of dialogue and bridgebuilding. This was complemented by interviews with the bridgebuilders and some participants in their processes. The analysis benefitted from conversations with members of other dialogue processes, combining a broad comprehension of the field with analytic depth.

During the fieldwork, monthly tripartite meetings were held between Juliana Franco Calvo, Gwen Burnyeat as Principal Investigator of the project *Stories of Divided Politics*, and Karen Arteaga Garzón and Laura Acosta Hankin from Embrace Dialogue (ReD), to discuss the monthly field reports, reflect collectively on findings and define next steps. These meetings corresponded to a commitment to **collaborative research and co-construction of knowledge**. Embrace Dialogue had a double role: as part of the research team and as one of the cases under study. This double role ensured the research questions, emphases of observation, and analysis all had relevance and impact for a bridgebuilding organisation. After the fieldwork, preliminary analyses were shared with research participants, whose comments and reflections were incorporated into the writing of this report.

An important lens for this investigation, somewhat unexpected, was **maternity**. Ethnography is, itself, a **relational method**. During the fieldwork, Juliana Franco Calvo was present in the field both as ethnographer and as a new mother, because she began fieldwork with a five-month-old baby, whom she brought with her on field trips. In parallel, Gwen Burnyeat gave birth to her son two months after the fieldwork began. This lens of shared maternity enabled two analytic movements. Firstly, we centred **the family as a primary model** via which people learn to relate across difference, and to live with –and despite—the conflicts which this difference generates. Secondly, we introduced **care as a key epistemology** for understanding bridgebuilding, in line with feminist approaches like those of philosopher Sara Ruddick, who argues that maternity, understood as a way of being in the world, has practical applications for peacebuilding.[21]

This lens forms part of a feminist commitment to **recognise that the personal is political** and that experiences of care, vulnerability and connection are central to understand how relationships across difference are built and maintained.

[21] Ruddick, Sara. 1989. *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace.* New York: Ballantine Books.

5. The Four Case Studies

This section presents four dialogue initiatives in Colombia: It's Brave to Dialogue (*Valiente es Dialogar*, VeD), Mustard Seeds *(Semillas de Mostaza*, SdM), Embrace Dialogue *(Rodeemos el Diálogo*, ReD) and Social Dialogue Medellín (*Diálogo Social Medellín*, DSM). The objective is not to propose replicable models nor evaluate impact in quantitative terms, but to describe and analyse concrete practices, situated in specific contexts, and draw out lessons learned from their experiences and dilemmas. The initiatives differ in terms of their objectives, strategies, the populations they work with and their scales of action. This diversity reveals how bridgebuilding can have many forms, adapted to different contexts and purposes.

Throughout this report we include in inverted commas the words, concepts and phrases that each initiative uses to name their experiences, translated into English. We begin from this situated knowledge and put it into dialogue with our own interpretations and analysis.

It's Brave to Dialogue (*Valiente es Dialogar*, VeD)

Objective	"To build bridges between diverse and opposing people to weave long-term consensuses for dignified life and wellbeing, building dialogue capacities and generating relationships of trust and collaboration."
Created	In 2018 after a series of 'Social Dialogue Summits' led by the Inspector General's Office's *(Procuraduría)* delegate for Social Dialogue.
Composition	Working group (the dialogue participants), directorship, technical secretariat
With whom?	Emphasis on leaders, from political and business elites to indigenous and social leaders. "Leaders from opposing and diverse sectors"; "leaders willing to listen to the other voices that participate". Approximately 46 people.
Methodology	Biweekly online meetings and 3-4 in-person meetings per year. The technical secretariat facilitates with a *"sentipensante"* (thinking-feeling) approach that seeks to combine the rational with the emotional, ideas with grief. The methodology is governed by 10 principles: "willingness and commitment to participate in personal capacity; dialogue between opposing and diverse sectors, listening to different visions; valuing empathy and recognition of the other in their humanity; all voices count, seeking pluralism and valuing differences; *"sentipensante"* (feeling-thinking) dialogue process in constant construction and adaptation; space to weave relationships based on respect and trust, building a safe dialogue space; interest in strategic issues for the country, connecting the national with the local to build common visions, develop consensuses and identify disagreements; belief in the power of words and commitment to overcome stigmas and prejudices; willingness and commitment to work within one's own "square metre" to develop transformative actions; rejecting all forms of violence (symbolic, physical and structural); and a common purpose of building the country, weaving consensuses for a dignified life and wellbeing".
Description	VeD is a group of national leaders, including politicians from across the spectrum, representatives of the business sector, and indigenous and student leaders from across the country, who maintain a regular dialogue practice: every two weeks online for 1.5 hours, usually with an invited guest who offers input for the dialogue from their expertise. In-person encounters are held periodically in different parts of Colombia to weave relationships more closely. For VeD, dialogue is the purpose: cultivating dialogue habits and capacities among the participants. They prioritise working with leaders who can replicate this dialogue practice widely in their different spheres of influence, and create strategic relationships that can be activated in moments of need. VeD seeks to position dialogue as a public good and be an example that it is possible to build relationships across difference. A notable characteristic of VeD is the regularity of their dialogues. This requires organisational effort, as well as the commitment of a heterogenous group of leaders over a significant period of time. Although the relationships deepen most significantly in the in-person encounters, the online meetings create a practice, a consistency, and shared meaning, contributing to the development of a sense of community.
Examples of bridges	One participant in VeD says that being in this process "saved their life" in a moment in which they had received death threats for their activism. They turned to one of the relationships they had created in VeD, with someone from a very different sector, and thanks to that support were able to leave the place where they were being threatened. Another participant said that, despite having to encounter members of the group that murdered their father in the armed conflict, participating in VeD is one of the most significant things in their life and gives them reasons to live, speaking of the director almost as if she were a second mother. These examples reveal two types of relational impact: one practical and security-related, the other healing and transformative.

Mustard Seeds (*Semillas de Mostaza*, SdM)

Objective	"To carry out dialogues among strategic sectors of society about the persistent violence in Colombia and seek actions to overcome it; to contribute to debate on the need for a security model that can enable peaceful coexistence; to maintain dialogue about these issues with a critical and democratic spirit."
Created	In 2023, to fill the interlocution deficits of Colombia's Commission for the Clarification of Truth, Coexistence and Non-repetition (CEV), specifically around issues of security and economy. SdM has had to adapt its purpose: initiating the conversation by speaking about the CEV caused negative reactions among some participants, therefore it has focused instead on security. The issue of economy has proved more difficult.
Composition	Working group (the dialogue participants) and a technical secretariat of four people.
With whom?	"Elites with diverse trajectories and recognition among different sectors (retired military, academics, social leaders, business representatives) who have sometimes been political opponents, with trajectories in issues of security and coexistence". Approximately 16 people.
Methodology	Circular dialogues (internal conversations among the working group) and amplified dialogues (conversations with external actors). The process is characterised by the following principles: "economy in words and generosity in actions, active listening, self-reflection, horizontality, confidentiality and mutual care". The initial focus was the production of a document about security as a public good, and the conversation centred at first on that document. Subsequently, the process has evolved to focus on carrying out advocacy with the consensuses developed in the document.
Description	SdM is a group of national leaders. It includes politicians, representatives of the business sector, retired military personnel, ex combatants and social leaders from different parts of Colombia. They all have some kind of expertise in security. When they meet, they suspend use of formal titles (General, Dr, etc.) for everyone to participate in equal conditions. For SdM, dialogue is not an end in itself but a means to build consensuses to influence national security policy. They carry out dialogues ad hoc, both among themselves and with external actors. SdM seeks to fill information gaps and generate mutual understanding between different actors.
Examples of bridges	The contact between leaders who would normally be opposed in the public space allows for information gaps to be filled. For example, during a civic strike, blockades impacted the economy and polarised the country between those in favour and those against the strike. In that context, a businessman from the agricultural sector explained in detail the economics of the food chain to the other participants, which helped them to understand better the business sector's perspective on the strike and avoid simplifying discourses. Similarly, an ex-combatant from the FARC guerrilla explained details of the war to a retired General, who affirmed that it was "incredible" to hear this explanation and helped him to understand the perspective of his opponent in the war; he valued this greatly and recognised it publicly to the other participants. These are conversations that would never have occurred in other circumstances. In these examples, information is an aspect that strengthens relationships across difference, the key being that it is information shared via encounters and relationships, not in a vacuum.

Embrace Dialogue (*Rodeemos el Diálogo*, ReD)

(Culture of Dialogue Area)

Objective	"To design, convene and facilitate spaces of dialogue where diverse people interact with different actors, creating opportunities for reflection and mutual learning to build shared meaning about the challenges and opportunities in peacebuilding."
Created	In 2012 to support the peace negotiations in Havana and build a "culture of dialogue".
Composition	General assembly, executive directorship, approximately 60 volunteers, teams in Bogotá, Nariño, Antioquia and internationally. Diverse participants in each event; an organisational culture that seeks to put into practice the ways of being and behaving that ReD aims to cultivate in society. ReD sees itself as a "big family", and centres on the human relationships and vocation of its members. Family members and friends of members are often included in activities, intertwining the personal and the professional.
With whom?	People of different backgrounds, from experts in issues of peace to sectors that are not organised or involved in political issues.
Methodology	Peace breakfasts with "affective-participatory methodology", a semi-structured dialogue with an invited guest followed by dialogue with participants, groups of maximum 25 people each breakfast. ReD has 6 principles that govern all its spaces: "respect, generosity, honesty, solidarity, co-responsibility and self-criticism", which are shared at the beginning of each dialogue encounter.
Description	ReD is an organisation dedicated to peacebuilding with four areas of work: culture of dialogue, peace pedagogy, implementation of the 2016 peace accord, and ending the conflict. ReD connects advocacy in national issues –e.g. it holds the technical secretariat in the peace negotiations with the guerrilla group Comuneros del Sur in Nariño, and manages the Truth Commission's exhibition—with the transformation of personal lives of volunteers through dialogue, via the internalisation of ReD's principles. For this study we focused on the area of culture of dialogue, whose flagship initiative are the peace breakfasts, events with participants from diverse backgrounds, from experts to housewives. The focus of the ethnography of ReD was a series of peace breakfasts in Bogotá and Dabeiba, a conflict-torn municipality in Antioquia. These breakfasts sought not only to listen to experts but for all the participants to reflect, share and learn from the experiences of the others, nurturing an "encounter at the level of being". The breakfasts focused on four issues: peace pedagogy, implementation of the 2016 peace accord, the "total peace" policy and social dialogue. In Bogotá, the participants were diverse kinds of stakeholders on each issue; in Dabeiba they were members of the local community who generally knew each other but normally would not have the opportunity to converse on these issues. In the words of the coordinator of ReD Antioquia in one breakfast, "although many of us already know each other, it's good to know each other in a different way."
Example of a bridge	Among the participants in the Dabeiba breakfasts there were two people with many differences: a young rapper and hairdresser, and the coordinator of a group of elderly people in a rural hamlet where ex-combatants live alongside the local community. After the reiterated peace breakfasts reflecting together on peace, these two formulated a project to teach young people hairdressing using the elderly people as models who tell their life stories and stories about the land while they get their hair cut. Some of these stories will then be made into poems, rhymes and songs. This project builds capacities and creates employment opportunities among young people in a territorial context in which this can contribute to prevent forced recruitment; it also supports the activities of the elderly, giving them relevance in the community, dignity, and new meaning to their lives. It generates an intergenerational dialogue and builds memory in a territory affected by the armed conflict, based on the life stories of its inhabitants. This example reveals a spontaneous impact: the project was not planned by ReD but emerged via the reiterated contact between different people to reflect on peace together.

Social Dialogue Medellín (*Diálogo Social Medellín*, DSM)

Objective	"To create a dialogue space that fosters human connection and builds trust among leaders in Medellín with diverse, plural, and even opposing visions and interests, without excluding any sector." Thematic focus on coexistence and security in Medellín.
Created	In 2023 following the invitation of the Institute of Intercultural Studies of the Javeriana University of Cali to replicate in Medellín the model that this institute create in Cali, with the "Calima group".[22] The Centre for Faith and Cultures adapted the concepts and methods of the institute for DSM.
Composition	Three-person team within the Jesuit organisation, the Centre for Faith and Cultures (Centro de Fe y Culturas).
With whom?	Diverse sectors, including civil society, academia, family compensation funds, trade unions, state institutions and police (approximately 30 people). DSM has also wanted to invite the business sector but this has proved more challenging.
Methodology	Dialogues carried out mainly in the Centre for Faith and Cultures, first to get to know each other and define thematic focuses, second to discuss the key thematic focus chosen by the group (citizen coexistence), third, territorial thematic dialogues (this last phase was not included in the study as it occurred after the fieldwork was finished).
Description	DSM is a group of people with influence in the city of Medellín. Its dialogues seek to generate consensuses to improve coexistence in the city. They have ten principles which guide their activities: "Promote social dialogue with a perspective of reconciliation; strengthen hope and resilience; act with a medium- and long-term vision; reinforce collectives and the civic ecosystem; promote dialogue with a territorial focus; engage the business sector; include youth; operate within the rule of law; align actions and agendas between the state, social organisations, and citizens; and become an actor capable of convening, coordinating, and articulating social dialogue initiatives across the city. For DSM, dialogue is a means to arrive at consensuses on coexistence, with a focus on a specific territory.
Example of a bridge	In one coffee break, two policemen sat with a student leader from the "front line" (the young protesters who, during the 2021 protests, located themselves at the front in order to protect other protesters from the armed forces, using improvised shields and elements), and a professor from a public university. They were all enthusiastic about meeting each other. The police had kept shell casings from bullets used during the protests; the students had also kept some, including one student who kept a shell from the weapon that cost them an eye. In the conversation, they spoke about melting these casings down and creating a symbolic monument. They exchanged phone numbers to explore carrying this out together. The "bridge" here is not just the possibility of a collective action, but also the enthusiasm with which people who were previously on opposite sides of a violent and unequal confrontation encountered each other, and the desire to explore a possible human relationship.

22 Véase https://www.javerianacali.edu.co/intercultural/nuestros-dialogos

6. Analysis

For this analysis, first we describe the common elements among the initiatives, including the practices and dynamics of the encounters they create, the characteristics of the bridgebuilders themselves, and the shared tensions these initiatives face. We then analyse some of the differences between the cases.

6.1 Common Elements

6.1.1 The Encounter

Bridgebuilding begins with the encounter, understood as a **carefully designed relational practice.** The initiatives share a series of elements to create encounters across difference and hold dialogues.

1. **Strategic and inclusive convening:** All the initiatives seek to bring together diverse people from a cross-section of different sectors and life trajectories. Plurality is understood in a broad sense—generational, territorial, racial, gender-based, class-based, and in terms of experiences related to the armed conflict—and is the result of deliberate convening decisions.

2. **Encounters at the level of being, not from institutional roles:** titles and formal hierarchies are set aside in order to put life stories, vulnerability, and shared humanity in the centre, creating conditions that are as horizontal as possible for interaction and facilitating the building of empathy even amid disagreement.

3. **Logistics and choreography:** careful attention to detail in creating "environments for dialogue," from posters to framing and greetings, because logistics communicates and shapes spaces. Logistics is a relational language and contributes to creating a sense of ritual.

4. **Food:** in-person initiatives built around a shared meal create intimacy, but also a sense of solemnity, like the ritual of a family meal.

5. **Guiding principles:** some initiatives present their principles at the start of each gathering, almost like spiritual commandments. Others have ground rules that facilitators draw on to guide dialogues.

6. **Structure and flexibility:** all the initiatives have carefully designed methodologies. Bridgebuilders use their instinct to know when to allow the dialogue to depart from the methodology and take on its own dynamic, or when to call the group back to the rules.

7. **Information as an input for building understanding across difference:** some initiatives bring in external guests to fill gaps in understanding among people with different trajectories and positions, helping participants better understand one another and the world around them.

8. **The interstices as the magic moment:** beyond the formal sessions, informal encounters—during coffee breaks or at the beginnings and ends of dialogues—emerge as spaces where relationships deepen spontaneously.

9. **A ritual practice that requires time, repetition, and patience:** bridgebuilding is not an event, a methodology, or a project; it is a prolonged relational practice. Whether in a virtual community of practice or in specific territories, repeated encounters make it possible to build relationships of trust that transcend formal spaces and extend into everyday life. Moreover, sustained contact allows dialogue to become part of participants' identities.

10. **Care as a relational epistemology:** bridgebuilding involves sustained labour of following up with, listening to, and dedicating personalised attention to each participant—a significant investment of emotional labour that includes accompanying difficult emotions, managing tensions, holding silences, and respecting individual rhythms. Care is a relational epistemology that entails knowing and understanding others through attentiveness and responsibility.

11. **Emotions have a central place:** all the initiatives coincide in emphasising that their work is not a technical or rational exercise, but a commitment to creating "deeply human" encounters. They speak of "bringing the heart" to the dialogue, with stories, ideas, and grief. Perhaps for this reason, many participants refer to these spaces as "healing."

6.1.2 The Bridgebuilders

Dialogue initiatives bear the imprint of the people who lead and sustain them over time. Although each process involves diverse teams and people, we identified a series of **shared characteristics** among the bridgebuilders.

1. **Bridgebuilding is a vocation.** For bridgebuilders, this is a passion, an ethical conviction, and a life philosophy. They strive for coherence between what they promote and the way they live, embodying in their daily lives the change they wish to see in society. As one interviewee put it, "it's like a stance toward life, a way of being."

2. **Personal and professional life are intertwined.** They practice bridgebuilding in their family, personal, and digital contexts. One interviewee noted, "the filters are always in place, for example, in the relationship with one's partner." The lessons learned in these intimate spheres inform their professional work, and in turn, their dialogue work transforms the way they relate to others in their personal lives.

3. **They embody the very idea of bridges.** Their personal and professional trajectories have enabled them to develop capacities for listening, openness, and understanding toward people who are very different from themselves. They have learned to hold complex conversations and to inhabit disagreement, which strengthens their legitimacy among diverse actors.

4. **They have the legitimacy to convene across difference.** Personal relationships constitute their capital. They are the visible "face" of the initiatives, and participants' willingness to attend dialogues often depends on that face. At the same time, being the public face entails personal and reputational risk.

5. **They let go of ego.** They nurture dialogue without becoming the protagonists of the process, but rather the medium through which it happens. Their work consists of creating the conditions for others to dialogue, listen to and recognise one another, while also modelling a bridgebuilding disposition as an example for others.

6. **As caregivers, they carry out intense emotional labour:** thinking about each participant, calling them, understanding their personal situation, being attentive to their journeys and logistics, and caring for the details of the encounter, the food, and the timing. In addition, bridgebuilders are deeply affected by the emotions, grief, and tensions of the participants, which entails a heavy emotional burden.

7. **They are highly dedicated, reflective, and self-critical.** They work beyond formal schedules and constantly question themselves: who they are, why they engage in dialogue, and where they want to move toward. This disposition toward self-evaluation also explains their

openness to dialogue with this research, their interest in the analyses, and their willingness to incorporate reflections and lessons learned in the investigation to strengthen their processes.

6.1.3 Common Tensions

Bridgebuilding is neither harmonious nor linear. It unfolds amid **persistent tensions, ethical dilemmas, and structural contradictions** that cannot be definitively resolved. These tensions are a constitutive part of the practice of creating dialogue across difference. Recognising them allows for a better understanding of the limits, risks, and scope of bridgebuilding, without either idealising or underestimating it.

1. Tension between dialogue as an end in itself and dialogue as a means for action and advocacy.
The initiatives repeatedly grapple with the question of the role of dialogue: whether it is an end in itself, oriented toward relationship-building, or a means to influence public agendas. This tension does not appear as a mutually exclusive dilemma, but rather as a spectrum along which the initiatives move depending on the political context and the dynamics of the process. At times, the emphasis is on sustaining the encounter and the relational process; at others, dialogue is more directly linked to goals of advocacy or collective action.

2. Tension between the need for funding and the unpredictability of impact.
Bridgebuilding initiatives operate in a terrain where impact is neither immediate, linear, nor easily measurable, but rather fragmented and indirect, sometimes becoming visible months or years later. This logic clashes with funding models that privilege predefined results, quantifiable indicators, and clearly delimited outputs. While the process requires time, repetition, and experimentation, donors impose rhythms, targets, and languages that demand predictability.

3. Tension between institutional sustainability and process autonomy.
Dependence on projects and external resources creates an ongoing tension between the sustainability of the initiatives and their autonomy. Securing funding makes it possible to sustain teams, encounters, and processes, but it also entails constraints on timelines, approaches, and room for manoeuvre. The initiatives seek to preserve the flexibility and ethical coherence of their work, even as they operate within contractual frameworks that do not always recognise the logics of relational practices.

4. Tension between continuing the dialogue and communicating the process.
The initiatives face the dilemma of whether to devote their energy to sustaining dialogue processes or to investing it in narrating and making them visible—something that can inspire others, expand the symbolic reach of dialogue, and create legitimacy for dialogue in the public arena. Narrating, however, requires pausing, translating, and, to some extent, simplifying processes that are intimate, fragile, and still unfolding. There is a risk of prematurely exposing relationships that are still consolidating or of turning dialogue into a communicative product rather than a living practice.

5. Tension in relation to power, asymmetries, and inequalities.
In every dialogue space, power inequalities (class, gender, symbolic capital, resources) shape relationships and determine who speaks and who is heard. Although the initiatives mitigate these asymmetries through strategies such as equitable distribution of speaking time and careful design of the encounters, it is not possible to eliminate them entirely. Recognising this tension means acknowledging that dialogue does not take place under ideal conditions and that the responsibility for building bridges rests especially with those who hold greater shares of power. [23]

6. Tension around the emergence of a "dialogue elite".
In Colombia, some individuals participate repeatedly in multiple dialogue initiatives and have internalised their practices. This creates a tension for the initiatives under study, between deepening the work with those who already have the disposition and experience—"the like-minded differents," in the words of one participant—and broadening the reach to include people with more dogmatic positions or who are more distant from dialogue, but who are also harder to convene.

7. Tension between the space as an end in itself and the expectation of replication.
Many initiatives operate on the assumption that those who participate in dialogues will replicate these practices in their personal and professional contexts, yet assessing this impact is impossible. This creates a tension between conceiving the dialogue space as an end in itself, valuable for the experience it offers, or as a pedagogical setting aimed at producing broader effects. The initiatives sustain this ambiguity by recognising that not everything that is planted will flourish, and that replication cannot be imposed or measured.

8. Tension around political context and the willingness to meet.
Bridgebuilding depends on participants' willingness to come together, which is influenced by the political context and can vanish in moments of polarisation. At the same time, the relationships built constitute a form of capital that can be activated in more favourable circumstances. The initiatives oscillate between adapting to the immediate context and commitment to long-term processes, aware that encounters cannot be forced, but the ground can be prepared for when they become possible.

6.2 Differences

The initiatives vary in their objectives and strategies, responding to different contexts, trajectories, scales, and aims. In a democracy, bridgebuilding requires **a diversity of approaches** operating at different levels, with varied populations and purposes.

1. Focus on influential elites versus community relationships: some initiatives work with political, social, or opinion leaders, relying on their capacity to replicate and model behaviours. In these cases, initial confidentiality can be a key strategy to protect participants and enable trust-building. Other initiatives concentrate their efforts on specific communities and grassroots relationships, seeking to improve coexistence in particular contexts.

2. Ways of naming and conceiving "difference": the initiatives use different terms to refer to dialogue participants ("opponents", "adversaries", "diverse", "different", or even "enemies"), choices that reflect distinct understandings of the nature of the conflict and the purpose of the encounter, because naming the other implies taking a position toward them.

3. National versus territorial scope: while some initiatives seek to influence debates and dynamics at a national scale, others focus on local transformations. Both scales respond to different needs and can be complementary.

4. Position toward consensus and disagreement: some initiatives view reaching consensus on the issues addressed as desirable; others do not seek consensus but rather experiences of respectful disagreement.

5. Bridgebuilders' positioning: there is no "neutral" position from which to build bridges. Facilitators differ in how they understand and manage their own positioning. Some see themselves as "multi-partial," moving between different social and political worlds. Others explicitly acknowledge their political stances, yet approach bridgebuilding as an ethical exercise of engaging with otherness from a situated position.

6. Composition and organisational culture: the structure, organisational culture, and forms of financing influence bridgebuilding processes decisively. Some initiatives have stable teams; others depend on staff rotation and project-based funding. Likewise, some rely on fluctuating volunteer support, while others must make their work legible to external organisations or donors. These differences shape the rhythms, capacities, and room for manoeuvre of each initiative.

The analysis of common elements, tensions, and differences among the initiatives allows us to understand bridgebuilding as **a relational practice with multiple expressions, which together produce a critical infrastructure enabling dynamic connection between diverse sectors of a society and the circulation of ideas around difference and coexistence.**

[23] powell, john a. with Rachelle Galloway-Popotas. 2024. *The Power of Bridging: How to Build a World Where We All Belong*. Boulder: Sounds True, p120

7. Conclusion: Interconnectedness as spiritual healing

The metaphor of the bridge evokes an intentionally constructed structure. However, the analysis of the four case studies shows that bridgebuilding is both **an intentional practice and a process that generates spontaneous and unpredictable effects.** There is a constant interweaving between the thoughtful and careful action of bridgebuilders, and that which emerges organically from the encounters across difference.

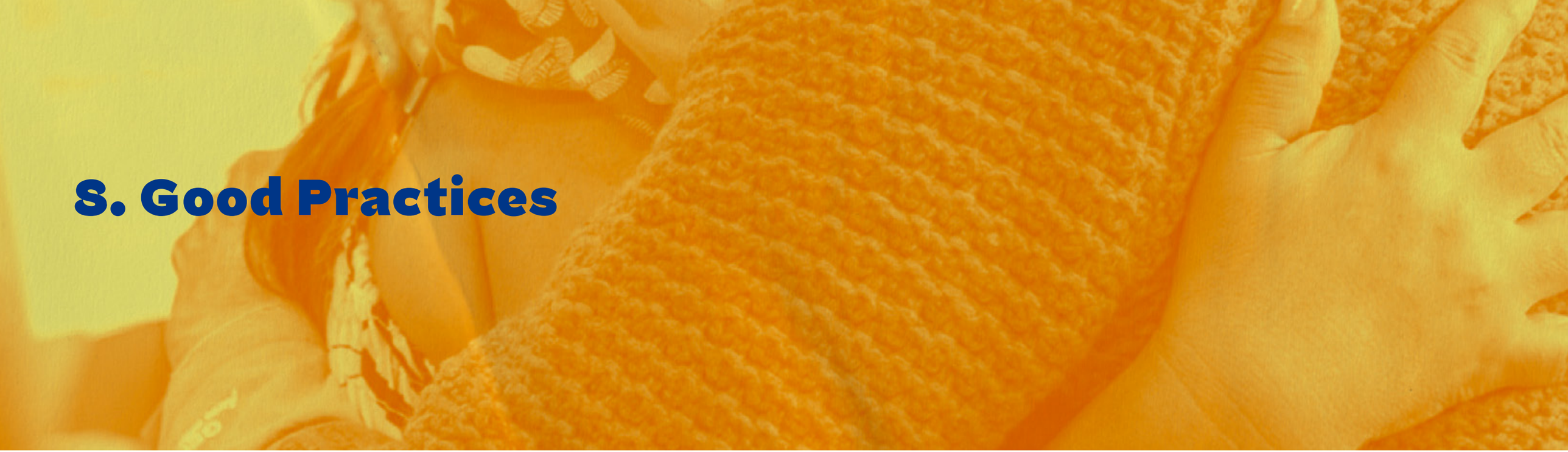
This **interweaving of the intentional with the spontaneous** is evidenced in the language of bridgebuilders. Interviewees described their work as "weaving things that didn't yet have a weave ... actors or issues that wouldn't have connected if we hadn't generated a space to allow that connection." They spoke of the "millimetric gaze" toward convening, a strategic reading of "between whom and for what purpose" bridges are built. This intentionality is nurtured by creativity and intuition; they speak of their "sense of smell" in knowing when to make a methodology more flexible because the dialogue is taking its own course or when to call for a return to ground rules, and how to "identify what broke, what was ruptured, or what has never existed"—trust, information, recognition, or the opportunity to get to know each other—in order to attempt to restore it. Bridgebuilding is an organic process, produced by this dance between intentional efforts and their unpredictable effects.

In today's global context of polarisation, fragmentation, and isolation, bridgebuilders invite us to coexist better with otherness, with all the conflicts which that entails. **To coexist despite those conflicts**, as we learn to do, always imperfectly, within our own families, whether those of blood or those we chose, is **the essence of human coexistence, democracy, and peace.**

The purpose of these experiences is to contribute to **public issues**. The topics being explored in these dialogues are urgent issues for their society, whether national, local, or both. In that sense, bridgebuilding is **a commitment to doing *politics*** in Hannah Arendt's sense of *polis*, a space where words and action are shared.[24] Building relationships amid conflicts and differences is the essence of the *political*. Bridgebuilders are *political beings* because they create and care for relationships across those differences and those conflicts. Their processes seek to r**adiate outward**, generating **virtuous spirals** of encounter, and create a more expansive "us" in Colombian society. **Cultivating that "interbeing" is cultivating democracy amid polarisation.**

In a context like Colombia, in which the search for peace is a permanent aspiration, bridgebuilding, through a plurality of processes with different emphases, objectives, scales, strategies, and populations, is **a key ingredient** in peacebuilding because it creates new and transformed relationships that constitute **the relational infrastructure for peace.**

[24] Arendt, Hannah. 1998 [1958]. *The Human Condition.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.



8. Good Practices

Bridgebuilding is not a recipe, nor a closed set of techniques. However, we identified a series of situated learnings from the initiatives under study. These are adaptable good practices which can guide people and organisations interested in creating encounters across difference, recognising that each context demands adjustments, sensitivity, and context-specific decisions.

1. Invest time and care in building and sustaining relationships with each participant. Trust is not a prerequisite, but rather a gradual construction. Sometimes bilateral relationships must be cultivated before bringing different people together for an encounter.

2. Cultivate relationships within the team. The organisational culture of the initiatives is a microcosm in which members model the relational values they seek to promote.

3. Information and expert knowledge can be valuable inputs; however, a bridgebuilding encounter is not an academic seminar. When it comes to events with external guests, involve participants in a fluid exchange rather than a question-and-answer methodology.

4. Create time and space for the interstices. Bridges are built through a dance between organised dynamics and free spaces where people can connect with their own energy and with the creativity that the encounter generates in them, allowing unexpected projects, ideas, or connections to emerge.

5. The role of the third party that convenes and facilitates is fundamental. Bridgebuilders are not neutral actors; they occupy situated positions, with different trajectories, values, and "faces" that represent different things to different participants. They are part of the bridges they build. In some cases, distributing the convening role among several people or profiles within the team can strengthen the legitimacy of the process. These actors translate between different languages, codes, and social worlds.

6. Manage timelines and expectations. Bridgebuilding operates in a long and non-linear timeframe. It is strategic to build relational capital on less threatening ground before addressing sensitive issues, as well as to recognise that it is not always necessary or desirable to convene the extremes. Working with "the like-minded differents" can strengthen relational capacities that these individuals can implement in their own personal and professional spheres.

7. Incorporate reflexivity and emotional care. The most solid initiatives are those that constantly self-evaluate, adjusting their strategies in response to changing contexts. At the same time, caring for the emotional well-being of those who facilitate and sustain these processes is a necessary condition for their sustainability.

Taken together, these good practices constitute a living repertoire that can be revised, adapted, and recreated according to specific contexts. Their value lies precisely in reminding us that bridgebuilding is, above all, a relational and situated practice: the essence of human "interbeing".

Culture of Dialogue:

Honesty to build trust. *Respect* to build on differences. *Self-criticism* to re-evaluate our prejudices. *Generosity* to give the best of ourselves. *Solidarity* to support each other. *Co-responsibility* to work together for the nonviolent transformation of armed conflicts.

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